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11 JANUARY 1981**WHY VIET NAM?***Prelude to America's Albatross.*

By Archimedes L. A. Patti.

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By GADDIS SMITH

**W**AS there a moment long ago when the Vietnam War and its hideous consequences for Southeast Asia and the United States could have been avoided? Archimedes Patti, an American witness to lost opportunity, says yes. The time was the late summer of 1945, after the Japanese had been defeated but before the French reinstalled themselves in Vietnam. At that moment the United States Government had the option of recognizing the independent Vietnamese regime proclaimed by Ho Chi Minh, keeping back French imperialism and assuring that the region lived happily ever after.

This is a romantic but compelling piece of might-have-been, and no one is in a better position to put the case than Mr. Patti. In 1944 he was assigned by Gen. William ("Wild Bill") Donovan to head a mission of the Office of Strategic Services (the World War II predecessor of the C.I.A.) to China, with responsibility for gathering intelligence from and conducting clandestine operations in Japanese-occupied Indochina. Since 1940 the Japanese had enjoyed a free hand in Indochina, although a French collaborationist government remained nominally in control. In March 1945, after the liberation of France, the French military in Indochina staged a bungled uprising against the Japanese, who thereupon imprisoned the French forces and ruled the country directly.

While Mr. Patti and his colleagues were planning how to harass the Japanese, Japan — rocked by the atomic bombs of August 1945 — suddenly surrendered. Indochina was now a vacuum into which rushed several groups claiming to speak for the Vietnamese: some French officers bent on re-establishing France's glory, British who were sympathetic to the French, an army of Chinese Nationalists and Mr. Patti's O.S.S. mission. The bulk of this book is Mr. Patti's almost hour-by-hour account, from memory amply reinforced by research into O.S.S. and other archives, of what happened.

Mr. Patti was and is an idealistic foe of colonialism and a staunch admirer of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Mr. Patti believed with almost religious fervor that the United States must act on its commitment, as proclaimed in the Atlantic Charter, to support the political independence of all peoples who had been forcibly deprived of that independence. He believed that this commitment applied to all peoples and not merely to the victims of Axis aggression. He shared Roosevelt's distrust of the French and believed with the President that the French should not be allowed to return as rulers to their former colonies.

Even before Roosevelt's death in April 1945, American policy toward Indochina had been clouded by an

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inconsistency between the President's personal views and some official assurances that the United States did not intend to dismantle the French Empire. After Roosevelt's death, policy became absolutely opaque. The immediate task was to arrange for the surrender of Japanese troops in Indochina, a task assigned to the Chinese Nationalists north of the 16th parallel and the British south of that line. Thus, Mr. Patti's mission to

Hanoi, in the Chinese zone, had little authority in the formal sense, although enormous prestige as representing the United States.

For Ho Chi Minh, whose Viet Minh regime proclaimed independence on Sept. 2, 1945, the United States in general and Mr. Patti in particular offered a chance of survival. Mr. Patti was captivated by Ho Chi Minh, seeing him as a selfless, dedicated, shrewd leader. His account of long

conversations with Ho and of the broad support Ho was winning among the people is reminiscent of an earlier American's firsthand observations of another revolution: John Reed's "Ten Days That Shook the World," about the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Mr. Patti was convinced that Ho's undoubted Communism was subordinate to his Vietnamese patriotism and that an independent Vietnam under Ho would be compatible with American ideals and self-interest. But there was little Mr. Patti could offer Ho other than a sympathetic ear, some personal advice and facilities for transmitting direct appeals to Washington. With each passing day Mr. Patti felt more isolated. Few Americans outside his own entourage shared his vision. The French saw him as an enemy, and they were right. Meanwhile, the British sent a pro-French force to the southern part of the country and soon helped the French regain control of Saigon. In October 1945, the O.S.S. was terminated with unseemly haste, and Mr. Patti returned to Washington to observe what now seemed inevitable: war between the French and the Viet Minh, and then the American war. His vision of Ho as nationalist patriot was rejected by American leaders in favor of the vision of Ho as agent of the world Communist conspiracy.

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